

# EPA unveils water-quality standards for delta

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It took more than seven years and two false starts for federal and state regulators to come up with the new Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta water-quality standards unveiled Thursday.

And still their work isn't finished.

Yet to come is a hearing at which the state Water Resources Control Board will face the Solomon task of dividing the plan's water costs among, perhaps, more than 7,000 delta water users.

That process is likely to be contentious, pitting California water users against each other over shares of a steadily shrinking delta-water supply.

And that means that Thursday's agreement is highly unlikely to end the long-running delta debate.

"The agreement is important, very important, but it is one step in a very long process," state Resources Secretary Douglas Wheeler said in a briefing on the new pact.

Final details of the agreement, which shifts 1.1 million acre feet of water to fish and wildlife in

critically dry years, were worked out in marathon meetings over the past week.

Those meetings culminated a process that began in July 1987 and grew more urgent last April, when the federal Environmental Protection Agency settled a lawsuit filed by environmentalists over salinity and other delta water-quality issues — and agreed to a Dec. 15 deadline for setting new delta standards.

## Replace 1987 standards

The new standards replace and strengthen a set that was adopted by the state board in 1978 and declared inadequate by a state court judge in 1984.

Two years after that, an appeals court ordered the board to take environmental needs into account when developing new delta standards, even if that meant taking water away from other users beyond the two biggest delta diverters — the federal Central Valley Project and the State Water Project.

The board began its hearings in July 1987, and announced a plan in November 1988 that would limit future delta diversions to 5.5 million acre-feet, roughly equal to peak usage at

that time. But agricultural and urban water users objected to the limits and the plan was dropped two months later.

A second effort also ended in failure when EPA rejected a new state plan, adopted in May 1991, that set new delta salinity stan-

dards but did not address diversions.

The final round began in July 1992, but this time, external events overtook the process.

Two fish species dependent on the delta were declared endangered or threatened.

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